

1998

## Introduction

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### Recommended Citation

Dabydeen, David, Introduction, *Kunapipi*, 20(1), 1998.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol20/iss1/3>

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## Introduction

### Abstract

In June 1948 the S.S. Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury and 492 Jamaicans disembarked. Between that date and the 1970s, when primary immigration from the Caribbean was effectively terminated, several thousand West Indians came to live in Britain. The Empire was 'coming home', claiming rights of abode as British citizens holding British passports. Today there are half-a-million people of West Indian origin or descent living in Britain.

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## INTRODUCTION

In June 1948 the *S.S. Empire Windrush* docked at Tilbury and 492 Jamaicans disembarked. Between that date and the 1970s, when primary immigration from the Caribbean was effectively terminated, several thousand West Indians came to live in Britain. The Empire was 'coming home', claiming rights of abode as British citizens holding British passports. Today there are half-a-million people of West Indian origin or descent living in Britain.

The Jamaican immigrants who came on the *S.S. Empire Windrush* were obeying traditions. West Indians, historically, have only travelled in order to work. Between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries, they had been shipped from Africa and India to the West Indies to work in the plantations. In the period up to the Second World War, they were recruited to build the Panama Canal and to work in the factories of the United States of America. After the Second World War there was great demand for labour in Britain as the nation began to rebuild her broken cities. West Indians were actively recruited to work, through advertisements placed in West Indian journals by London Transport, the British Hotels and Restaurant Association, and similar organizations. They came to work in factories, buses, trains, hotels and hospitals, in jobs traditionally of low status and low pay. And they came with a sense of cultural identification with the Motherland. They saw themselves as British. Their education after all was based on the British system: the books they read (from the *Royal Reader* to Enid Blyton and William Wordsworth) were books being taught in schools in Britain. Their language was English or English-based; many of their religions (Church of England, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.) were derived from Britain and passed on to them by British missionary movements. And the very towns, villages and counties they lived in were named after British places and personalities – for instance, Georgetown, Albion Estate or Brighton village (in British Guiana); Cornwall, Middlesex, Surrey (counties in Jamaica); Barbados, with its Nelson's Column at the heart of its capital (predating the one in London's Trafalgar Square) was commonly known as 'Little England'. The journey to Britain however was a journey to an illusion, for the West Indian immigrants faced the reality of rejection by the Motherland. They may have believed passionately in their closeness and affinity to Britain and possessed a sense of belonging, but the British were equally convinced of their alienness, their otherness.

### II

A handful of immigrants had literary ambitions, but they too had to undergo rites of passage on the English factory floor. Both Sam Selvon and George Lamming spent time as common labourers whilst their first novels were being considered for publication. Wilson Harris, between Faber's acceptance of his *Palace of the Peacock* and the appearance of the novel, found employment as a factory hand. (V.S. Naipaul was one of the few writers fortunate enough to be exempted from cheap, casual labour. His Trinidad and Tobago Government scholarship took him by plane to England and Oxford).

Still, for all the humiliations endured (for in their countries, both Selvon and Lamming were respected journalists; Wilson Harris was a qualified and experienced land-surveyor), England was an exciting place for any prospective writer, with its several publishing houses, literary journals and significant reading public. One could achieve some degree of originality in England, for apart from Edgar Mittelholzer, no West Indian had established a strong presence (Una Marson's poetry was practically unknown and grossly undervalued; C.L.R. James was read by a minority). The 18<sup>th</sup> century English slave narratives by Olaudah Equiano, James Albert Gronniowsaw, and Ottobah Cugoana were long out of print,<sup>1</sup> as were Mary Prince's and Mary Seacole's nineteenth century autobiographies. The English had long forgotten the continuous black presence in their midst from Elizabethan times. As far as they were concerned, the *Windrush* brought black people into the country for the very first time. And, as Selvon says in *Lonely Londoners*, although the post-war West Indians came from different countries, from different ethnic groups and social classes, the English lumped them all together as lowly Jamaicans.

### III

Anne Walmsley, in her comprehensive study of *The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966-1972* writes that:

would-be writers arriving in Britain from the Caribbean in the 1950s found a range of opportunities and encouragement open to them, especially if they lived in London. Book publishing was experiencing somewhat of a post-war boom; small, young publishing houses were eager to bring out fresh work by fresh, vigorous new voices from far corners of the Commonwealth, especially those who used English with the fluency, individuality and verve of West Indians. Publishers found a ready market for books about these writers' tropical home environment and society, despite their containing much implicit, and, especially in the work of Lamming, explicit criticism of colonialism. Books which reflected the new Phenomenon of West Indians making their home in London also found an audience.

Sam Selvon himself spoke of the 'wonderment and accolade that greeted the boom of Caribbean literature and art in Britain in the early fifties'. Undoubtedly there is much truth in such statements. Between 1952 and 1958 Sam Selvon, George Lamming, John Hearne, Edgar Mittelholzer, V.S. Naipaul and Andrew Salkey, published between them twenty novels, so we can assume that their publishers found sales to be satisfactory. Lamming won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1957, and Naipaul won it in 1959. Naipaul also received, in 1957, the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize. Andrew Salkey received the Thomas Helmore prize in 1955 and Sam Selvon was given the travelling scholarship by the Society of Authors in 1958. Such honours were a measure of the favourable reception accorded to West Indian writers in the 1950s, though it has to be said that the experience of the mass of West Indians was very different: anti-black riots in 1958, and radical disturbances throughout the 50s and 1960s made the West Indians feel decidedly unwelcome in Britain.

This pattern of literary achievement and social rejection continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The Brixton and Toxteth riots coincided with some crucial publications and related activities. James Berry's anthology, *News for Babylon* (Chatto, 1984), Grace Nichols' *I is a Long Memored Woman* (Kamak House, 1983) and Fred D'Aguiar's *Mama Dot* (Chatto, 1985) were landmark publications, as was Berry's poem 'Fantasy of an African Boy' (1984) which won the British National Poetry Prize. Caryl Phillips' first novel, *The Final Passage* (Faber, 1985) was published to critical acclaim, winning the Malcolm X Prize for Literature (an

initiative by the radical Greater London Council). Other important works included poetry anthologies edited by Stewart Brown, and Paula Burnett's monumental *Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse* (1986). Writers of an older generation than Nichols, Linton Kwesi Johnson, D'Aguiar *et al.* continued to publish: there was prose by Wilson Harris and V.S. Naipaul, poetry by E.A. Markham and John Figueroa. A spate of new presses arose, to complement the output of Faber, Heinemann and Longman. These presses, (Akira, Hansib, Karia, Karnack House, Peepal Tree) were by and large owned and managed by West Indians. They joined older small presses set up in the 1960s and 1970s to publish and distribute West Indian writing, presses such as Bogle, Dangaroo, L'Ouverture and New Beacon. Eric and Jessica Huntley, John La Rose and *Race Today* Publications did invaluable service to writing by the setting up of the Radical and Black Book Fair, a biennial event held in London between 1981 and 1995, which attracted thousands of potential readers. Finally, the value of British based journals like *Wasifiri*, *Race and Class*, *Race Today*, *The Voice* and *Caribbean Times* cannot be overestimated: they created space for serious critical consideration of the emerging literature, supplementing the work of international publications like *Kunapipi* and *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*.

In literary terms, the 1990s has been a period of consolidation and steady growth, in line with the more settled mood of the West Indian community. There have been incidents of social disorder (mostly relating to the death in police custody of black men, or to seeming police apathy in solving crimes against blacks, such as the killing of Stephen Lawrence), but on a less violent scale than the 1980s disturbances. Today, people of West Indian origin (by birth or culture) are represented in Parliament, Church, University, Union, Pavilion, Stadium and Media, to a greater extent than before. That Trevor Phillips, a Guyanese journalist and broadcaster (and the first ever black President of the National Union of Students) is being seriously considered for the position of Mayor of London, indicates something of the changed status of West Indians in Britain. That Bill Morris is the popularly elected leader of Britain's largest and most powerful Trade Union (Transport) indicates something of our progress from the early days of bus-conducting and ticket-collecting. Unemployment, discrimination in housing, and over-representation in penal and psychiatric institutions, continue to erode such progress, but will not stop it. And works of the imagination continue to pour forth from the presses.

## NOTES

1. See Paul Edwards and David Dabydeen, eds. *Black Writing in Britain, 1770-1890* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991); V. Carretta, ed., *Unchained Voices* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996). The most readable account of the history of Africans and West Indians in Britain remains Peter Fryer's *Staying Power* (London: Pluto Press, 1984). It builds upon or supplements the pioneering scholarship of Follarin Shyllon, Moira Ferguson, James Walvin, Ziggy Alexander, Audrey Dewjee, Paul Edwards, Ian Duffield, Edward Scobie and Kenneth Little, among others.